



#WHEN
women
speak

**#WHENWOMENSPEAK:
(RE) DEFINING KENYAN FEMINISMS**



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(noun)

FEMINISM

the advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of political, social, and economic equality to men.

(RE)DEFINITION

What happens #WhenWomenSpeak? Read on.
Brainstorm, (re)defining Kenyan feminisms...





A FEW WORDS BEFORE YOU READ THE REST

“Patriarchy, in many ways, is the primary form of oppression. Its victims comprise half of the world (there are 102 men for every 100 women on the planet) and it transcends all other forms of discrimination – be on it race, religion, education, social class or sexuality. It is pervasive – transcending time, all social strata and affecting all societies. It is the most universal form of oppression.”

[All Animals Are Equal](#)



BRENDA : There is much to be said about the relations between men and women, especially now, when the subject of gender relations and feminism has become en vogue again, with many calling this renewed interest in feminism “the fourth wave”.

I am known to say that in most societies, if not all, man is treated as greater than woman. A rich man is greater than a rich woman, a black man is greater than a black woman, a Christian man is greater than a Christian woman, and a male professor is greater than a female one. Entrenched within all other forms of oppression is patriarchy, the discrimination against women because of their sex.

Yet, in deconstructing patriarchy, which is what feminism aims to do, the conversation happens mainly in the West. Many articles, journals, podcasts and videos are made in the USA or Europe, with the global south featuring little in this discourse.

Perhaps it is because their issues are not necessarily our issues. Perhaps it is because we do not know where to begin. Perhaps we have just found our voices. Whatever the reason, there comes a time when things have to change. That time is now.

This quarterly hopes to be a starting point for conversations on feminism in Kenya, Africa, and perhaps the larger global south. It will articulate on issues that affect women in these areas of the world, and name them, for once you name your demons, the exorcism can begin. You need to call them by name as you cast them out.



MICHAEL: What happens #WhenWomenSpeak? The image of the talking woman has been construed to mean some sort of bothersome thing will occur next. Nagging of some sort. The idea of women speaking has become something that society would rather not come to terms with. The idea of women being heard is one that society would rather not think of.

We believe that #WhenWomenSpeak great things happen. It is good for the social, political and economic well being of a nation for half of its population to be empowered. The strides that can be made are astronomical.

The next few pages dive into the worlds of erased histories, neglected presents and unimagined futures. They represent thinking that, we hope, will encourage the reader to go deeper into feminist thinking within the country. This work is not exhaustive. There are so many feminisms, there is so much history. There is so much that has happened, that is happening, that hasn't been touched. This work is a gateway.

Join as we take the first steps on a journey of (re)discovering Kenyan feminisms – because feminism is not a monolith. Many women are feminists, but in different ways, and no one way is greater than the other. We want to explore feminisms in Kenya, be they influenced by race, religion, education, social class, sexuality and any other circumstances that depict Kenyan living.

RAPE (noun) CULTURE

a culture in which rape and other sexual violence, typically against women, is considered the norm and is tolerated and even excused in a society.



Unravel

Marziya Mohammedali

unravel a woman, peel back
the layers she shows the world.

pull at the fraying edges of her masks,
the different coloured slashes that mark her mouth.
kiss the patches you find, at the
tops of her cheekbones, the small space
between her eyebrows,
the tip of her nose.

take each woven word that drops,
frantic, from her lips; devolve them
into letters and sounds, strands in air
that you can see, feel, taste,
every time she breathes.

stretch taut the threads in her hands,
feel the furrows on her worn palms,
revel in the calluses, learn the stories
that dance over her fingertips
as you undo the knotted ends.

pull her sleeves back, trace the hidden lines
you find; run your thumb over the scars,
so tightly sewn together.

unravel until you reach the end,
untangle those moments when she
has too many colours woven in together,
unravel until you are left with just her.

count the ribs under her patchwork skin
Stretched tight with years of eating disorders
and embroidered with all the times
she has found herself an unmother.

unstitch her ribcage, reach for her heart;
hold together all the ends
of her living tapestry.



Conversations with our Mothers

Wairimu Muriithi

"Mr Speaker, if you do not slap a woman, you will note that her behaviours will not appeal to you. Just slap her and she will know you love her. This is when she will you call her darling."

Kitale West MP Wafula Wabuge, July 1976

There are things that are said every day.

"A woman must understand that a man has needs he cannot control."

There were friends you used to have.

"Sure guys will thirst over your naked pics but on the real no ninja wants to wife public property."

There are things you often come across.

"Don't dress that way. What are you trying to tell men? Do you want to be raped?"

There are ways to be.

"It's because I'm a married woman. When you have a husband, you will understand."

There are questions you ask.

"Boys will be boys. "

There are lessons you must learn from birth.

•

Feminism triggers, perhaps forces, memory-work.

Consciously coming into, living and learning through feminism calls for re-examination and necessary readjustment of personalities, priorities and perhaps most importantly, relationships.

There are jokes you cracked or cracked up at that are no longer funny because they have always been dangerous. You realise you have been policing yourself and others according to your socialisation within very real patriarchal structures. You hear yours and your friends' stories and comments about the women they met in the club, on the bus, in a meeting room, for what they really are - banal misogyny. You cringe at the person you have been, and the possible effects of the subtle and not-so-subtle acts of violence you have committed against anybody who isn't the heterosexual Kenyan - and typically respectable - man.

You wonder why it is that you were like that.

You begin to remember.


Your memory narrows in on those who are closest to you.

•

Feminism recognises the importance of teaching the men in our lives, from as early as possible, not to endorse rape culture. There are necessary conversations to be had.

Last year, I talked to my teenage brother about rape for the first time. It wasn't the most comprehensive of conversations, and there is still a lot of work to be done, but I was relieved—and, admittedly, a bit surprised—by his answers to my questions. He knows that rape can be committed by anybody. He knows not to victim-blame-and-shame. He knows that 'non-violent' rape is just as bad as 'regular' rape. I remember specifically asking him if our mother had ever spoken to him about rape, as she has several times with me. He had never had this conversation with anybody: he just knows.

"Your dress is too short. You need to show men that you respect yourself, or they won't respect you. Honestly, if it's not for sale, don't advertise it."



Statements like these are commonplace in many women's lives. We see and hear variations of them in our dailies, on the internet, in quotidian conversations and even, at some point, even in our own conscience. As I begin to remember, though, I realise how many times these words were said in my home, by my mother, in my brother's presence.


I feel what is beginning to be a familiar stab of resentment.

When I re-hear the things I have been told by my mother, aunts, grandmothers and teachers over the years, a blame game begins to formulate. They have taught me to be afraid, just as they have taught my brother that women are, and will be afraid of him. They have taught me to be just-loud-enough-[but]-not-too-loud, and they have taught him to expect women not to be as loud as him. They want me to be just-successful-enough because there will be problems if I generate a salary higher than that of my husband, or because a too-successful woman is likely to pay less and less attention to her man and kids. They have taught him that women should hold themselves back for him. Many things we know about the static ways of men, we have learnt first or most vocally from a woman.

As I remember these life lessons, it once looked to me that women, more than the men, are largely responsible for upholding oppressive patriarchal structure, while many men can appear blameless and claim innocence. This is embodied in the defensive argument given by men when a feminist is calling them out for enabling patriarchy, especially by endorsing rape culture—the “not all men are rapists/misogynists/patriarchal/that bad” argument.

Superficially, this can appear to be true. I cannot recall a time my father, uncles and grandfathers have expressly forbidden me to do anything because I am a woman—this, I understand, is my privilege. All relatively successful in the capitalistic sense of the word, they encourage their daughters' education, career formation and financial stability. Rarely has a future husband or child been mentioned. This is the forward-thinking, respectable man, who supports the empowerment of all women.

Right?



Yet this is the subtle manipulation patriarchy has taken on in an increasingly neoliberal world. While there are still plenty of men who are publicly and proudly the authority on the place of women, they often don't need to say anything, or anything particularly 'extreme'. Earlier waves of feminism have done what they set out to do. There are successful women occupying senior positions in businesses and governments *and* many manage to do so while 'juggling' both marriage, in which they do not overshadow their husbands, and motherhood, to which they must commit themselves above all else. The ones that don't, we must not turn into.

"Poor thing. I hope she is able to find a husband one day."

•

"Don't be a feminist, okay? Because I want you to be a nice girl."

An OB/GYN I saw recently does not approve of feminism.

Often, people's introduction to feminism is fraught with stereotypes and/or singular stories. A feminist, according to popular opinion, is an angry woman who hates all men. She fights for female professionalism and equality in the workplace, and against marriage and children. She argues for equal rights in the eyes of the law and against the social requirement to look presentable and act feminine. She wants to have too much sex—angry sex—which makes her a whore, or no sex at all because she doesn't need a man to satisfy her. In the long run, therefore, she will end up old and miserable and lonely, with no eggs and no man.

"There are things that are our culture. A very intelligent woman who teaches at the university sat here in front of me and told me she cannot cook for her husband. I asked her what she thought her mother thought of this silly behaviour."

Given this introduction, there is little surprise how many women steer away from feminists and feminism. 'Calling someone out' on being a feminist, or performing feminism in subtle ways, becomes an insult. Calling an African woman a feminist comes with a further accusation from the rest of heteropatriarchal Africa: feminism, like homosexuality, is Western.



"However you behave over there is up to you. But Kenya has not changed since you left, or even since I was a girl. Men here will not stop to think you are a feminist before they rape you."

I shut up. Her lip curls. In the village they insist it takes to raise a child, the list of mothers dwindles. I used to call her my teacher. We no longer talk.

•

"You have to be twice as good to get half of what they have."

Rowan Pope

"Kenyan women have been laying their bodies on the line for years."

Wambui Mwangi, 'Silence is a Woman'

"You must do your best; work hard, succeed and take care of yourself, because the world has never been, and will never be, kind to women."

My grandmother

Women have survived. Women continue to survive.

Feminism requires paying close attention to layers of histories underneath seemingly unremarkable words and deeds. In their continued warnings, anecdotes, forbidances and 'excuses', we begin to hear something else.

"You need to be careful about some of these men you befriend."

"No man is going to marry a woman who constantly fights him. How long do you think the world will respect you as a single woman? And what man stays with a woman who will not give him children?"

Even though they may tell us, it is impossible to know the experiences they have had in the years before and during our existence. Nobody can speak of fear, or compromise, or adaptation unless they have known them intimately themselves. Somebody taught somebody taught somebody - *showed* them that certain things could be avoided if they just stayed in their place.

"Whatever happened to Mercy Keino didn't have to happen if she'd been careful. I pray every day it doesn't happen to you."

We all know women who did not survive.

The seemingly logical solution, therefore, is that we should learn from their 'mistakes' so that our survival comes easier. We cannot emerge unscathed, for this would be impossible, but we are expected to remain strong in the unchanging niches carved out for us by conforming to them and avoiding trouble. This is *their* survival.

"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare."

Audre Lorde

This is a favourite feminist go-to. Self-care is an inherent part of the struggle. What we may be guilty of ignoring, however, is that our methods of self-preservation exist in a different frame from those who have brought us up. We, as self-proclaimed feminists, may be quick to condemn our mothers for anti-feminist, and by extension anti-woman, performances. This thread of arrogance assumes our methods of self-preservation, whatever they may be, are superior to theirs. Our willingness to be known as feminists does not place us above their decisions, conscious or otherwise, to adjust themselves within patriarchy in order to survive rather than actively fight it.

"They wouldn't grant me a passport without written permission from my husband, because I still had his name. All this country knows is that your husband owns you. I changed my name back, because nobody owns me. I am my own person."

Conversely, it would be an act of violence to impose upon these women we look up to, having considered their own experiences and defiant survival, an identity of feminism if they do not do it for themselves.

It is the same violent erasure that accompanies the Strong Black Woman. Not only is the label of feminism as identity secondary, or even impossible, but seemingly small performances of defiance against patriarchy do not *belong to* feminism, just as compliance with it is not necessarily actively *anti-women*. Whichever it is, it is first and foremost self preservation. With this in mind, do we hear their warnings about how we dress, act and speak as projections of this self-preservation and not as active attempts to maintain policing?

•



"Well, I can't tell you how to dress anymore. All I have to say is that if you are determined to be this way, I hope you're prepared for the consequences of it all."

There are words more brutal than blows.

This is how one of our conversations ends. My mother has heard feminist arguments for years. She wonders why I am willing to put myself in harm's way for what she calls my intellectual-not-realistic principles. My aunt tells me she used to be a feminist, and then she got saved. That I am no longer Christian is her proof that feminism does more harm than good to the self.

I don't know if they can tell that I, too, am afraid.

"Men don't think the way we do. Boys will be boys."

"Yes, and my brother is a boy."

She flinches.

I don't know if our mothers think their sons are not the boys that will be boys—the ones that will hurt women. If they do, I don't know if their fear that their daughters might be raped is equal to the fear that their sons may one day rape. I don't know if they believe their sons will be different from the men they have known and survived.

Another memory from many years ago:

"If ever a man touches you in any way you don't want him to, scream. Run. Fight. leave. Come and tell me. There shouldn't be anything you cannot tell me."

I love you, she says

[even though you are a feminist, her sadness and anger whisper.]

I love you too, I say, and see that I may never be able to tell her about the nights I walk home alone exhausted and in tears, the smell of fear and drunk men who got too close clinging to my clothes. I cannot survive the "but I told you not to's; I am not sure she can survive the pain.

(noun)

PRIVILEGE

a special right, advantage,
or immunity granted or
available only to a particular
person or group of people.





Even the streets aren't safe

Sheila Maingi

A few weeks ago, I shared an incident on Twitter that happened to me on my way from work.

It was a normal weekday evening and, having wrapped up at the office, I set out for home. I had hardly walked a few metres from the office when I saw three young men walking in my direction. They had a belligerent air about them. I would have been more frightened had it been late at night and I was walking alone on some deserted street. But it was still broad daylight and lots of people were making their way home.

As soon as the three men came within inches of me, one of them tried to grope my breast in the full glare of passersby. I was quick to duck to his side before he had the chance. But what transpired after was much worse. The man and his two friends began to insult me. One said I had no reason to feel so proud with such big breasts; the other called me a slut while the attacker laughed loudly. Another group of about nine young men seated by the side of the road chimed in, not in my defense. They joined the three men in hurling expletives at me. One of them shouted that had I encountered them elsewhere (to mean in a less crowded place), I would have learned my lesson (implying physical and/or sexual assault).

Mortifying as it is, I wish this were an isolated incidence - a one off occasion by some ill mannered and rogue young men. But it was not. This is the kind of street harassment women have to endure everyday as they traverse public spaces when making their way to their different occupations. I cannot keep count of the number of times in a week I undergo one form or another of street harassment. Many women can attest to this as well. Street harassment is so common, so normal that most women have come to accept it as a way of life, despite how offensive, infuriating, violating and demeaning it is for them.



Street harassment is not a preserve of a particular class or socio-economic stratum. Men in their different capacities, professions, age and ranks harass women on the streets. Only to them it is not viewed as harassment, but the manly right to offer unsolicited opinions and spew lewd comments at any woman they so desire.

Street harassment is that man on Tom Mboya Street who will make a sexual comment about your breasts or your butt. It is the men seated by the side of the road who will whistle at you or catcall you in the morning as you make your way to school or work. Sometimes, it will be the well dressed old man who rolls down the window of his Range Rover Sport and honks at you or asks you to get into the car with him. It is the makanga who winks at you or orders you to smile.

Another common manifestation is when a man(stranger) on the streets creepily thrusts his unwanted face in yours and tells you how beautiful you are then expects you to show gratitude for his compliment. If you've been near the Ngara exhibition stalls, you have probably had your hand forcibly pulled by the young male vendors. When you tried to free yourself from one's grip, three others blocked your way and had a merry time humiliating you. If you were unluckier, they squeezed your breasts or your butt. In extreme, but not rare cases, street harassment has ended up with a woman being physically assaulted or getting raped.

Street harassment is defined as form of sexual harassment that takes place in public spaces with the intention of intimidating the target and making the harasser feel powerful.

It is, very much, an element of patriarchy. Privilege gives men a sense of entitlement, allowing them to harass women in the streets without any feelings of wrongdoing. For instance, many men will argue that there is nothing wrong with stopping a woman in the streets to tell her she is beautiful or in forcing a woman to say hi to you. It is after all just a greeting, why refuse to acknowledge it? The truth however is that these attacks - and I intentionally refer to them as attacks because that is what they are - are never gestures of friendliness or a genuine desire to compliment.

In most cases, a man will want to 'compliment' you when in the company of other men. His intention is to show off to the others, to let them know that he is 'man enough'. He is as macho as they come. By calling you a slut when you refuse to respond to his so called compliment, he not only affirms his masculinity, but asserts his gender superiority. The more he



belittles you, the more his man card accrues points and the more manly he feels. Suppose you were to meet the same man outside the comfort of the company his fellow men, chances are that he would not display the same level of aggression.

But mob mentality is not always the case when it comes to street harassment. Some men will individually, by the powers granted to them by patriarchy, harass women on the street as a showmanship of their sexual/gender superiority as a single entity.

Women's bodies are objectified and depicted as men's playthings.

Men own us.

Patriarchy grants men the freedom to possess and control women's bodies, so that a man finds it perfectly okay to comment (either positively or negatively) on a woman's breasts in public. Her feelings on this matter are inconsequential. Such overt displays of privilege are channels of self-reassurance to men. It reminds them of their elevated position in the gender hierarchy.

The problem with this false perception of privilege is that, in most cases it starts to become a reality in the minds of many men. A man begins to feel entitled to a woman's body whether he knows her or not, whether she is old enough to be his mother or is someone else's wife. Society has already informed this man that any woman is his for the taking without him expecting much resistance.

Consequently, when this privileged man says hello to you and as a woman you refuse to respond, he feels wounded. His free pass to your body has been challenged. His privilege has been questioned. In the company of others, especially men, to let this slide without a word would be an insult to his masculinity and a cause for banishment from the masculine fraternity. And so he takes vengeance while reasserting his position by calling you a slut or a whore. This brutal act secures his membership among his peers.

In most cases, women are called too proud or their bodies negatively dissected when they refuse to respond to catcalls, whistles and car horns. This mirrors another aspect of our patriarchal society - that to put a woman down, you must attack her physical attributes or her sexual reputation, if not both. Destroy her image in a sexual context. If you can't own her sexually, tarnish her name, her sexual behaviour and her reputation, so that no other man will desire her. Make her as undesirable as possible.



In a nutshell, it reflects society's attitudes about women, their bodies and who owns them.

Sexual harassment hurts women.

There is nothing appealing or flattering about having 10 strange men by the road scream how beautiful or ugly you look. It is utterly offensive when someone you don't know grabs your butt in the club because you are in a short skirt and they assume this means you want them to. It's completely depressing when you have to take three girlfriends along when shopping to create a safety net because you are afraid of the young men who will yank your hand and refuse to let go until your blood clots.

In some instances, women find themselves having to change their routes home, to work, to church and so forth because they are afraid of encountering some sort of harassment along their normal routes. It becomes an inconvenience when you have to use a longer route just to avoid men who will stop at nothing short of making you feel terrified. It is completely unfair that some streets automatically become no go zones for women because of possible attacks.

Most of us walk with fear at the back of our minds 24/7. We walk with our eyes fixed on ground or with loud music playing in our earphones to avoid any confrontation with street harassers. We are constantly thinking and planning on how we can minimize any unintended situations of unwanted attention. In a country where citizens are granted so many freedoms, women are forced to do with even less freedoms than their male counterparts when it comes to safety in accessing public spaces.

Another disturbing fact is that these attacks also happen to underage girls, both in primary school and in high school. I have seen grown men harass young schoolgirls in uniform. Some of these men are old enough to be their fathers. In some cases, these girls are even sexually assaulted and raped. Some get pregnant and have to deal with unplanned for babies or health risks that come with abortion. When it is not schoolgirls, it's old women, some of whom are grandmothers.

And this is exactly what happens when that sense of entitlement thaws in some of these men's heads. They start to think that any woman who turns down their advances deserves to be punished. When a woman ignores their greetings on the streets, they will sexually assault her or rape her so as to teach her a lesson in respecting men. We have all heard or read



stories of women getting physically attacked because they would not cooperate with a man they did not know on the streets.

What men fail to understand is that, no woman owes a stranger anything. Be it accepting a compliment or responding to greetings. Greetings are voluntary. Men need to realize that a woman does not have to smile on the streets if she doesn't want to. Stop asking her to smile. She owes you nothing and the best thing you can do is leave her alone.

It is a fact that not all men harass women. But most of the times, a man has friends who do. Yet most men won't say anything when they see their friends, for instance, making an unwarranted sexual remark at a woman in the gym. They will occasionally feel embarrassed on their friend's behalf but that's as far as it goes. In some instances, you find fathers and sons; uncles and nephews seated somewhere together catcalling women as they pass by.

There is an urgent need for us to address the problem of street harassment. We need to stop treating our mothers, daughters, sisters and friends like inferior human beings. As a man, you never have to worry about going to a certain shop because the men who sit outside might make an unwelcome comment. You never have to worry about male colleagues at work- some as old as your father- making inappropriate sexual comments and jokes directed at you. As a man, you're not constantly in fear of darkness falling while you are away from home because some man on the streets might attack and rape you. When you go to the club, you don't have to worry about not wearing your favourite skirt because some pervert might slip his hand under it. When taking that taxi home, you never have to worry about the cab driver turning on you. Most women end up having one or two trustworthy cab drivers who they will await for as long as it takes because it is much safer than taking an unknown cab.

How then can we move away from this culture of intimidating women on the streets to respecting them instead? One, would be to have these conversations with our children, both boys and girls. It is important to let our sons know that women are not sexual objects to be violated on the streets, or anywhere else for that matter. It is important to drill into our kids the fact that women need to be able to walk freely in the streets or any other public space without fear of being attacked regardless of their background or status and at all times. Men need to serve as role models to younger men, teenage boys and even little boys.



In the same breath, men should be in the frontline supporting women in the fight against street harassment. A man should be able to castigate his friend when he has crossed the line by violating a woman's space. Men ought to have these conversations among themselves. The few men who are lucky enough to understand how street harassment is degrading to women need to share and try to convince their fellow men to see things in the same light.

The Kenyan law and the Sexual Offences Act do not address street harassment in detail. Understandably so, because it is difficult to have a stranger arraigned in court for calling you a whore or for grabbing your butt in public. The nature of these attacks is that they happen within minutes and are orchestrated by strangers who we cannot have arrested because they vanish in seconds. Evidence is hard to produce in such instances and there is only so much legal institutions can do. It is also impractical to have the police monitoring all streets for cases of harassment.

In developed nations, women's groups and individuals have come up with websites where women can discuss and share their street harassment ordeals. Others have created apps like Hollaback which allow users to share their experiences in relation to street harassment. They also organize events and seminars where they discuss such issues and brainstorm on how best to approach this problem. It would be helpful if we too, tried to come up with such sit downs where we can share and formulate solutions.

The most important thing we can do in order to undo this age old practice, however, is to completely shift our attitudes and consequently our behavior towards all the women we live with and interact with on the streets everyday.

Next time you want to make a sexual comment directed at a woman you see on the streets, think about whether your remark is welcome. Is it in the right context? Will she be offended or embarrassed by it? Would you be at ease if someone did the same thing to you? This is not to say that all compliments on the street are bad and unwelcome, but it is crucial that you re-examine your motive. Why am I doing it? Is it a genuine compliment or am I merely showing off my undeserved gift of patriarchal privilege?

Blood Knot

Phyllis Muthoni

You didn't mean clot?
What do you think,
makes it so thick - blood?
The mesh of collagen
criss-crossing a drop -
I think not.

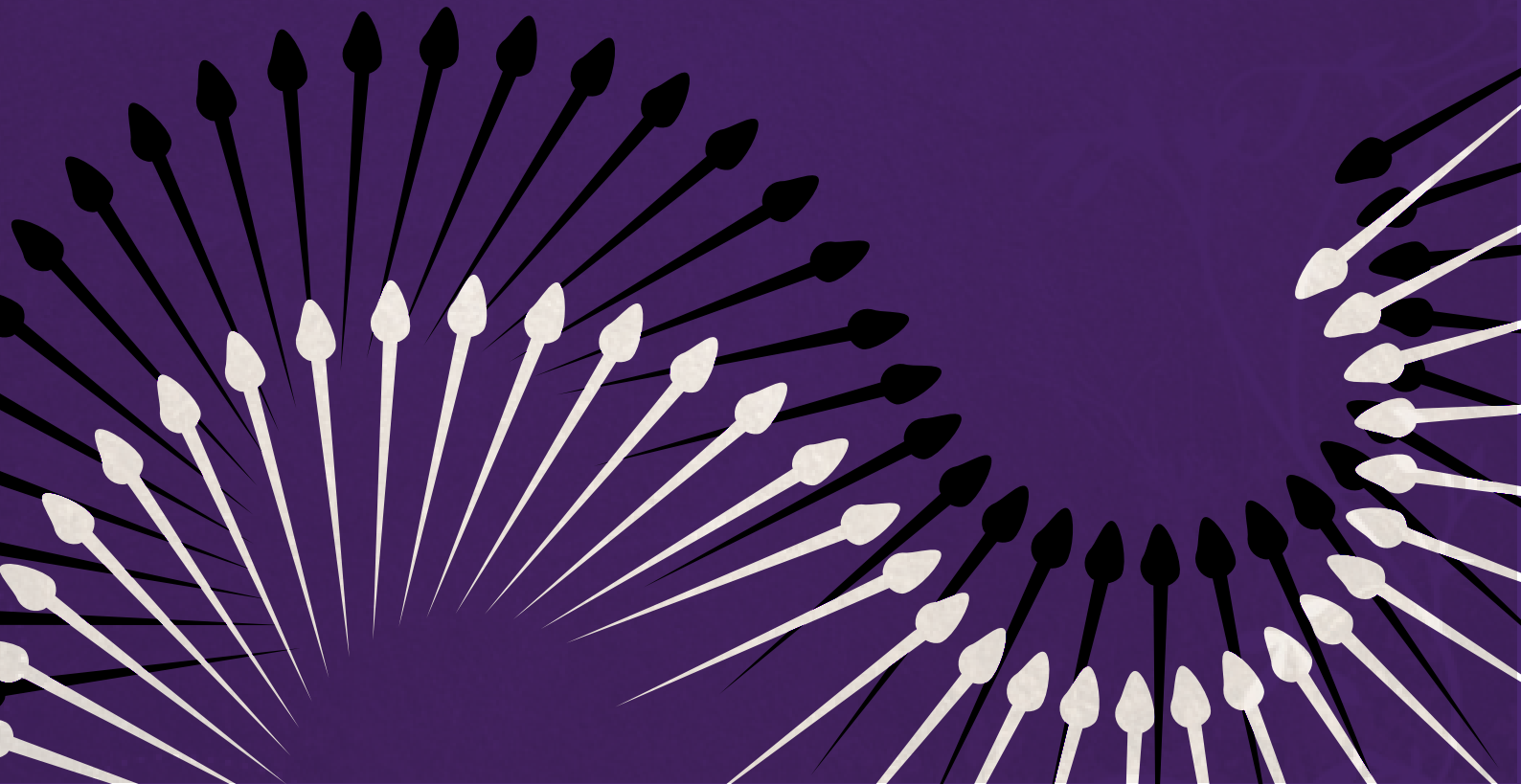
Take this woman I know:
who has convinced her daughter
not to leave. To stay.
The husband, he works hard.
He touches their daughter.
Stay.
He is a good man.
Flawed in certain ways.
Stay. Hope. Pray.
Four-letter knots.
Bonded with blood.
Her blood.
She cuts her wrists.
Her blood: her son.
His blood, because
she will kill him,
a clean blade
through the belly
if he touches their daughter
again.



(noun)

OPPRESSION

prolonged cruel or
unjust treatment or control.





Jail?

That's a Feminist Issue Too

Orem Ochiel

In the fifty years following Kenya's independence, successive governments have managed to entrench what is both a continuation and a perfection of the colonial penal system: The varieties of colonial incarceration - labour camps, torture camps, detention centres, prisons - seem to have been maintained, essentially, as they were. We might also imagine contemporary slums as the urban manifestation of colonial-era Reserves. The overwhelming majority of prisoners have little education, are unemployed (or irregularly employed), and live in poverty. Slums and prisons—the former feeding the latter, the latter feeding the former—become the places and spaces in which the nation-state houses its poor.

In Kenya, as of 2005, female prisoners comprised 3.6% of the national prison population¹. In 2006 and 2007 female prisoners comprised 12% and from 2008-2011 female prisoners comprised between 10% and 9% of the Kenyan prison population. The average number of women prisoners from 2006 to 2011 was 10,578 while the average number of imprisoned men during the same period was 85,947². That, consistently, the largest numbers of women are imprisoned under the "Liquor Act", and the "Employment Act" points to the fact that criminalisation in Kenya is almost entirely a war against the poor (the second largest category of "Various Cases" seems to be a catch-all and is difficult to analyse without additional data).

A confluence of factors makes the incarceration of women in Kenya an urgent feminist issue: the oppression of women within a patriarchal regime, the marginalisation of prisoners—"prisons disappear human beings"³—within a carceral regime, the marginal number of women in

1 Lisa Vetten, "The imprisonment of women in Africa" (2003), in *Human Rights in African Prisons* edited by Jeremy Sarkin, HSRC Press, 2008.

2 Kenya Bureau of Statistics, "Statistical Abstract 2012"

3 Angela Y. Davis, "Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex", 1998.



prisons (which further diminishes their already much-diminished visibility), the historically brutal disposal of women in colonial detention facilities⁴, and the recent and continuing usage of detention as a means of political repression and ethno-national oppression.

Furthermore, the mass incarceration of men (the obverse of the Kenyan pandemic of extrajudicial killing) places additional social and economic pressure on women, who have been systemically alienated from resources that might enable self-reliance, and who already live day-to-day with very little security. Women, who are often primary caregivers in a family, are left without means by which to support their households further entrenching the generalised impoverishment of the women left behind. This makes prison reform, prisoner release, and prison abolition important feminist issues in Kenya.

*I had to bring up our family single-handedly and had to support my parents: In fact in our life together, I have supported him [my husband] with all his needs because most of the time Kathangu has been unemployed. Since he started his battles with the state, potential employers have blacklisted him. (Mrs. Rosana Kathangu in *The Other Side of Prison*)*

It is from the point of view of the women left behind that “The Other Side of Prison: The Role of the Women Left Behind” (ABANTU for Development, 2004) documents the experiences of women who lived through the two and half decades (the 1980s and 1990s) of dictatorial rule under Daniel arap Moi. This period was characterised by the rigorous policing and

4 Caroline Elkins, “Chapter 7: The Hard core,” in *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya*, 2005. Without fail Fridays at Athi River meant screening, and the women hardly escaped the usual tactics of the government’s interrogators. They were beaten, whipped, and sexually violated with bottles, hot eggs, and other foreign objects, all in an effort to force them to talk. Alsatian shepherd dogs were also brought into the screening huts, where they would growl at and eventually maul those women who refused to cooperate. Compound 1 sent numerous letters to the governor, who, on occasion, responded personally by inspecting the camp. According to Shifra, Baring would “sometimes come and see us being screened. Other times we would be ordered to squat, and he would come around looking at us. He never asked us anything; he would just walk around glancing at us like we were animals.” [...] For most of the Emergency, women were detained primarily at Kamiti Camp. Kamiti had previously been a maximum security prison for criminals, but the circumstances of the war forced its transformation into a multipurpose facility. It was an overflow site for Embakasi prison and held several thousand men convicted of Mau Mau-related crimes. Behind its walls and barbed wire was also one of the largest known burial sites for Mau Mau adherents killed in the forests, on the reserves, and in detention camps, as well as those executed under Emergency Regulations. In the spring of 1954 the colonial government decided to open the gates of Kamiti to accommodate a surge of female Mau Mau convicts and detainees. Once fully operational, Kamiti would be unique in that it functioned as a self-contained Pipeline. In it women of all classifications—from the blackest of “black” to “white,” and various shades of “grey” in between—were detained and moved to different compounds based on their level of cooperation. Female Mau Mau convicts were fully integrated with the detainees, living in the same compounds and laboring together. At the end of their sentences they too became detainees, little altering their lives.



total militarisation of public life⁵. It also normalised political detention and extrajudicial killing in Kenya. The extent to which this normalisation occurred can be discerned from the name and location of two crucial sites of state violence and civilian resistance: “Nyayo House”, the Moi regime’s torture headquarters was located underground, in the heart of the central business district (and minutes away from the State House) of Nairobi, the national capital, while the multi-year protests to free political detainees was centred at what was baptised “Freedom Corner” in Uhuru Park (and later at the All Saints Cathedral), on the edge of the central business district of Nairobi. Thus, power relations in Kenya were describable within the realities and metaphors of the towering prison-house of the state and the marginal corner of burgeoning freedom.

The Other Side of Prison is a crucial historical document detailing the lived experiences of women under some of the darkest oppression Kenya has faced since independence. Each of the women in the book is a mother, grandmother, daughter, or sister of a man who was a political detainee of the Moi regime. Each of these women participated—even if at a remove—in some way, for some duration, in solidarity with the Release Political Prisoners (RPP) pressure group and the mothers who protested for “the unconditional release of our sons” at Freedom Corner. It is these women who endured years of activism and labour that was aimed at, and effective in, the recovery a generation of men that would otherwise have been lost.

“The Freedom Corner” by all accounts was a huge success. Mothers who participated were extremely proud of what they achieved. It led to their sons’ freedom. [...] This demonstration by women aged between 50 and 80 years was a landmark in the struggle against injustice in Kenya. (13)

The eagerness with which these women spoke out is illustrative of the extent to which a political detention regime, one in which bodies are disappeared, is also a regime of silence. The end of that regime in 2002 created a gap through which long-silent voices were impelled to flow and be heard. The story of these women is nothing less than the story of survivors and of veterans of concerted national struggle.

5 Keguro Macharia, [“Beyond Peace”](#), 2013.



In the book, it is noted that there is little to no documentation of that period (the 1980s and 1990s) in Kenya's herstory and that there is a lack of systematic analysis of women's coping strategies under repressive conditions. Crucially, of that long period in which democracy was tightly constrained and suffocated, there is a "need to document women's participation in the democratic process in post-independent Kenya and to highlight and document women's leadership roles in defending their rights and those of their children and spouses." (10) Women's participation is an aspect of Kenya's democratic life which continuously goes through un-writing and erasure. Documenting women's lives in this manner is thus not only a necessary means of securing the afterlife and re-circulating the energy of activism but is also an important act of resistance in a post-colonial, post-independence, post-dictatorial regime that is nonetheless built on the reproduction of disposable women and men.

During the Mau Mau war women played an important and crucial role yet their role was not recognised and has not been recorded in history. Sadly, during the 80s and 90s a large number of the women whose spouses, brothers and sons were arrested had no clue of why they were arrested so they were taken by surprise. (Wanjiru Kihoro)

Each of the stories in *The Other Side Of Prison* is a brief but incisive recounting of what each woman remembers to have happened, what she saw, what she did, and what she endured. Threads run through all the stories: suddenly finding out that one's spouse or son has been taken, not knowing "whether he was dead or alive", a lack of information as to where they were taken or precisely by whom, the need to collect funds in order to travel and locate the taken men, the terror of not knowing, the endless red-tape, stonewalling, and lack of official cooperation, the continuous police searches and harassment, fearfulness within one's community, straitened economic circumstances as detention dramatically reduces the household income, worry about children's mental health, schooling, and care, a determination to find and support the taken men.

When I heard that Paddy was arrested, I was stunned and very confused. I wanted to know where they had taken him. [...] It was not easy [...] I did not give up. (The late Marcella Ojuka)




Some of the beloved men have well-known family names, names that are inscribed into national lore. Others are less known while a few are anonymous. What this highlights is that women of all walks of life acted in solidarity against the government and the blanket of repression that treated the farmer, the fisherman, the community organiser, the student leader, and the lecturer, all alike, as “not a human being.” In a regime whereby political assassination was frighteningly common, the act of speaking against the government carried with it the possibility of fatality. That these women engaged with the government in peaceful protest must thus be seen as more than a re-investment in the nation-state or as an earnest, determinedly vociferous, appeal to power. The women at *Freedom Corner* were actively subverting the dominant order and re-imagining new expressions of direct democracy.

We showed how under the regime of Daniel arap Moi, the constitution had been changed frequently, leading to serious violations of human rights and strengthening of dictatorship in Kenya. (Wanjiru Kihoro)

In the Foreword to *The Other Side of Prison*, Prof. Wangari Maathai’s observes that, “[i]nterestingly no woman was detained or imprisoned although many were beaten up and locked in custody. Some went into exile.” In saying so, she is perhaps making the distinction between long term detention without trial or imprisonment (detention with trial) in one of the 99 prison institutions in Kenya, and detention in police cells as well as house arrests. Indeed, Rael Kitur and Veronicah Wambui Nduthu were held in police cells in 1982 for over a week until after their sons were arrested. Florence Nyaguthie Murage was arrested on August 7, 1990 (on suspicion of possession of seditious materials), interrogated, and tortured while pregnant at Nyayo House then held at the Langata Women’s prison for two weeks. While it is not clear exactly how many women were similarly maltreated, it is suggested that they were numerous.

This mode of political repression continues in Kenya, and was most recently exemplified by the killings at Mombasa’s Masjid Musa Mosque and the subsequent detention of seventy men and at least one child on suspicion of being linked to Al-Shabaab. In the coastal regions of Kenya, political detentions (under the rubric of the war against terror) have



effects, described by a woman witness, that echo the lamentations of an embittered Elizabeth Orchardson Mazrui about the carceral Moi regime:

[T]he political detentions of the 80s destroyed whole families. They destroyed lives; a lot of families were destroyed and the wounds these detentions caused cannot be healed. In almost all the families that had somebody detained, there are broken marriages or traumatised children. [...] This is particularly painful for the women who fought so hard for these people, fighting for themselves and their children. [...] We felt that this government has destroyed many lives. What I know for sure is that this government has destroyed a lot of families.

The destruction of Muslim families and communities in Kenya finds a seemingly infinite source of renewal in the bodies of ethnic Somali and Ethiopian asylum seekers. While the Refugees Act assures us that “[i]f police stop a Somali national entering Kenya without a permit, they may only arrest and detain that person if he or she does not wish to claim asylum,”⁶ Kenyan police routinely ignore such requests for asylum and detain refugees for “illegal presence”. This presumption of illegality is extended to Kenyan Somalis and Ethiopians:

Throughout the ten weeks of abuses in Eastleigh, police arbitrarily detained at least one thousand people in homes, streets, vehicles, and police stations, including in inhuman and degrading conditions. Police also falsely charged well over one hundred people—and possibly many more—with public order offenses, with no evidence of any kind to substantiate the charges. [...] Arbitrary detention was not limited to specific sweeps following the bomb or grenade attacks in Eastleigh. (HRW 2013)

Kenyan Somali and Ethiopian women have also been subject to mass imprisonment under false charges, with no consideration given to whether they are pregnant, have children, or are the sole caregivers in the household. The *de facto* encampment of refugees within the Daadab refugee camp places women without male relatives and minority women at particular risk of sexual violence (HRW 2010). The mass detention of

⁶ “Unlawful Arrest and Detention of Asylum Seekers and Abusive and Inhumane Conditions of Detention”, in “Welcome to Kenya”: Police Abuse of Somali Refugees, Human Rights Watch, 2010.



Kenyan Somali men then clears the space for the mass abuse, rape, and extortion of ethnic Somali women by Kenyan Regular Police, Administration Police, and the General Service Unit. These situations are becoming re-enactments of the abuses that occurred during the Wagalla Massacre in 1984 where 3000 ethnic Somali men were detained and subsequently slaughtered at an airstrip in Wajir District. Describing that day, one survivor recounted that having stripped and detained all the men and keeping them under armed guard, the Kenya military proceeded to ensure that “every single woman was raped that day.”⁷ The Wagalla Massacre might thus be differently thought of as *The Rape of Wagalla*.

Having detained Kenyan Somalis in their homes between November 2012 and January 2013, “a day after the November 18 bus attack [Kenya] police entered apartment blocks throughout Eastleigh, particularly in Section 1 of the district near where the attack took place, and raped and beat women and girls in their apartments.”

Other GSU officers brought the other three women to the truck. Their dresses were ripped and they were totally silent. We didn't have to say anything to each other because we all knew what had happened to all of us. [...] Similarly, a 50-year-old Somali woman told Human Rights Watch that in December 2012, two AP and two GSU officers seriously assaulted her with batons—including after she had collapsed onto the ground—when she tried to prevent them from taking her 17-year-old daughter away on 4th Street. More than two months later she said she was still in significant pain and was unable to sleep properly, while her daughter had fled to the Dadaab refugee camps out of fear of further police violence. (HRW 2013)

We need more research into the use of police custody (short term detention) in relation to the corruption which allows the police to operate a system of rent-seeking incarceration: In the case of the Somali and Ethiopian refugees, putative cash “bail” averaging KES 5,280, was demanded of all detainees⁸. Human rights defenders often report bail

⁷ Mohammed Adow, *Not Yet Kenyan*, 2013.

⁸ “Torture, Rape, Beatings, and Extortion by the Kenyan Police,” in “You Are All Terrorists”: Kenyan Police Abuse of Refugees in Nairobi/, Human Rights Watch, 2013.

Interviewees described 48 incidents involving GSU officers who extorted a total of Ksh 335,000 (\$4,036), or an average of just over Ksh 6,979 (\$84) per incident. Twenty-five incidents described involved RP officers who extorted a total of Ksh 286,900, or an average of Ksh 11,476. In seven incidents AP officers extorted a total of Ksh 38,500, an average of Ksh 5,500.



amounts of KES 30,000. All these amounts are criminally extortionate, are effectively bribes, and serve only to exacerbate imprisonment (when bribes cannot be paid) and more deeply entrench poverty (as the practice is widespread and targets the poorest citizens). This system of corruption is only possible because the overwhelming and devastating threat of incarceration exists and is made visible in the physical presence of the police force and of prison buildings.

Kenya retains the spirit and much of the letter of the English colonial penal system, a system that was designed to sustain and secure the imperial project through violent and sophisticated modes and architectures of punishment. As such, Kenya operates a system of criminalisation, incarceration, abuse, and extortion that is an immediate feature of a broader system of state violence against the marginalised. For Kenyan women imprisoned for three years or longer, it is the case that because women's prisons are less overcrowded than men's prisons, the condition of incarcerated women is considered to be (but is not) better and therefore not worthy of as much attention as that of the men (Vetten 2003). The lack of comprehensive research into the condition of incarcerated women in Kenya defines these women as precisely those who are truly left behind.

The colonial system which we retain, and which purported to reform and rehabilitate inmates, in reality makes impossible any kind of widespread or meaningful restorative and transformative justice. This is especially true when the most wealthy and powerful perpetrators of widespread violence are able to occupy the presidency of Kenya with absolute impunity. That incarceration has always been an undeclared war on the poor, as well as a tool of political repression, means that prison reform is unlikely to yield meaningful results in guaranteeing prisoner rights and dignity.

The main documents guiding prison reform in Africa—the 1996 Kampala Declaration, the 2002 Ouagadougou Declaration and the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners—all “overlook the distinctive aspects of women's incarceration, which include the marginal number of women in prison, women's gender roles [and the reproduction of these oppressive roles through gendered prison training programmes] and their reproductive functions.” (ibid.) As such, it is likely that even if some meaningful prison reforms were to occur in Kenya, incarcerated women



would still be subject to “cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment.”

Such treatment has been continuously repeated in the unjust arrest and imprisonment of women human rights defenders in Huruma and youth in the slums of Nairobi, Mombasa, and certainly throughout Kenya. In 2011, Ruth Mumbi reported,

*The term dignity does not exist in prison. We were ordered to remove all of our clothes for body search and they don't even care whether you are on your periods or not. It's such an awful experience, as soon as you remove your clothes you are supposed to put your legs apart for the body search. I was humiliated but could not help it when I saw a woman old enough to be my grandmother removing clothes together with us. From that moment I would not be referred as Mumbi anymore I had a new identity my prison number was 306/11 and Vicky's 306/12. [...] I was taken to Langata not because I was a criminal but because I had stood my grounds for peoples and women's right to health care.*⁹


Again, in February 17, 2014:

Around 11 am today, members of the Highway Self Help group were having a meeting in Kiamaiiko, in Mathare constituency. For reasons which are unclear, the police stormed the peaceful meeting, disrupting and dispersing the surprised members, arresting Sarah Ashina, George Luvala, Susan Mutindi, Alex Kamande, Francis Gachui and Steven Muturi.

The treasurer of Highway Self Help group, Ms. Sarah Ashina, a 34 year old mother of two who is eight months pregnant was, “senselessly assaulted” by the cops, an incident which left Ms. Ashina bleeding profusely. The police still insist on incarcerating her and have denied her access to urgent medical attention.

Sarah Ashina has been at the forefront of condemning arbitrary arrest of youths by the police in Kiamaiiko.

9 Ruth Mumbi, [“Kenya: Arrest of women human rights defenders in Huruma,”](#) Pambazuka 521 (2011-03-17)



Prison reifies and concentrates the powers of the state in creating and maintaining a legally justified injustice. What Ruth Mumbi describes is the enforced “ritual practice of mortification” which is the “legal fiction of civil death” that is always constitutive of the penitentiary system. (Smith 2008)

*[S]he loses all signs of her identity. Her nourishment is minimal and coarse. She performs the possessed labour of the slave. In her costume, scene, and gestures, she enacts her living death. [...] In order to understand the prison, we will have to see how living death was neither an accident nor an excess, but part of its design.*¹⁰

We remember Sophia Dolar, Pauline Wanjiru, and Ester Wairimu, women human rights activists:

*They were reportedly arrested in March 2000 with eight other human rights activists, held for five days in Nakuru Prison, Rift Valley Province. Upon arrival the women were reportedly forced to strip naked in full view of other prisoners and jeering prison guards, and beaten with sticks during interrogation. They were allegedly held in a large overcrowded cell holding 39 women, many of whom were ill. When they refused to eat uncooked food, they were reportedly beaten with canes and forced to eat the food. No official investigation is said to have been carried out. The Kenyan Government failed to respond to the letter of the two [UN] Special Rapporteurs [on Violence Against Women].*¹¹

We remember Eunice Wanjira Njira, 44-years-old, who in October 2013 was “convicted to a 15-month jail term” after being charged for “sending offensive text messages [...] and claiming to have had an intimate extramarital affair with a former Member of Parliament.” We remember also, the numerous women who have been and continue to be imprisoned in the Langata, Kodiaga (Kisumu), Nyeri, Meru, Shimo la Tewa, Kakamega,

10 Caleb Smith, “Detention without subjects: Prisons and the poetics of living death”, in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol. 50, No. 3, Fall 2008.

The prisoner becomes a divided figure: a redeemable soul, but also an offending body; a citizen-in-training, but also an exile from civil society; a resurrected life, but also an animate corpse.

11 *Violence Against Women in Kenya: Report prepared for the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women*, The World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), 2003.



Nakuru, Eldoret women's prisons, and other prisons and police cells countrywide. We remember the large numbers of mothers and their children held in our prisons.

In 2010, the United Nations General Assembly adopted The United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Female Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the 'Bangkok Rules') which recognised that the unique conditions that surround crime by women, their conviction for crimes, and their imprisonment.¹² "The Bangkok Rules are also the first international instrument to address the needs of children in prison with their parent." (PRI 2013) These rules also recognised that prison is often ineffective in its stated goals of rehabilitating women offenders and protecting society from such offenders. It made specific provisions for women's hygiene, menstruation, reproductive health and history, and childbirth. It emphasised and detailed the preservation of women offenders' dignity and their protection from violence. These

rules also documented all the levels of state, government, and civil society that are impacted by and required to act in order to successfully implement them. "The Bangkok Rules supplement the existing UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners and the Tokyo Rules on alternatives to imprisonment." (ibid.) It remains to be seen to what extent the Bangkok Rules will be implemented in Kenya.

In 2011, the Kenya government began talks with G4S with a view to privatising prison services and building new prison infrastructure. The handing over of prisoners to private enterprise is always a recipe for the intensified enslavement of human beings in the name of profit. The movement towards privatised correctional services portends a proliferation of new and concealed modes of dehumanisation.

Kenyan feminism, in order to retain its impetus to end the oppression of all Kenyan women thus has to concern itself with the abolition of prisons which perpetuate a regime of deepening precarity and

12 *The United Nations Bangkok Rules on women offenders and prisoners: Short guide*, Prison Reform International, 2013.

A considerable proportion of women offenders are in prison as a direct or indirect result of multiple layers of discrimination and deprivation.

Women mainly commit petty crimes closely linked to poverty, such as theft, fraud and minor drug related offences.

Only a small minority of women are convicted of violent offences, and a large majority of them have been victims of violence themselves.



human disposability that is “punitive, criminal and legal focused.”¹³ Within a hetero-patriarchal regime, a penal justice system will always apportion its punishments unevenly, skewing its violence towards and against women¹⁴.

Alternative interventions are necessary to ensure the safety and health of our communities not only because there is no clear evidence that prisons improve community safety, or because prisons are a recent import into Africa¹⁵ but because, importantly, “prisons are constitutive of violence in and of themselves and therefore are not viable

anti-violence tools.” (Kaba 2013) These interventions must in turn lead to a dismantling of the police-state which is coextensive with the prison-state.

Because the core of the problem, poverty, is unlikely to be solved within a capitalist neoliberal context that requires and produces the militarisation and marketisation of all life and a maintenance (and expansion) of the wealth gap, it is urgently necessary that we turn towards systems of reparative and transformative justice, and of community accountability. These might draw from African pre-colonial systems of justice which were not built around detention or focused on punishment. In such systems, “perpetrators of violent acts must understand the impact of the harms they cause. [A] context [outside of the courts, jails, and prisons] within which we encourage perpetrators to assume actual responsibility for harm [and] provide them an opportunity to be transformed if they will accept it.” (ibid.)

Perhaps then, we can ensure that women, who are already the victims of the most egregious violence a patriarchal society has invented—

13 Mariame Kaba, “[Cognitive Dissonance: Ending Rape Culture By Sentencing People to Judicial Rape](#)”, US Prison Culture, 2013.

14 Claire Mc Evoy, “No Justice”, in *Battering, Rape, and Lethal Violence: A Baseline of Information on Physical Threats against Women in Nairobi*, Small Arms Survey, 2012.

Data from the Gender Violence Recovery Centre (Nairobi Women’s Hospital) shows that very few of its clients obtain formal justice [for Gender Based Violence]. In 2010–11 medical hospital staff acted as witnesses in 178 separate cases, or six per cent of the cases reported during that period (GVRC, 2012, p. 31). That figure was just 75 in 2009–10 and 153 in 2008–09, or 3.0 and 5.4 per cent of the total number of cases, respectively (GVRC, 2010a, p. 20; 2011a, p. 19). There is no available data on the number of convictions in these cases.

15 Jeremy Sarkin, “[Prisons in Africa: An evaluation from a human rights perspective](#)”.

Incarceration as punishment was unknown to Africa when the first Europeans arrived. While pretrial detention was common, wrongdoing was rectified by restitution rather than punishment. Local justice systems were victim- rather than perpetrator-centered with the end goal being compensation instead of incarceration. Even in centralized states that did establish prisons, the goal of incarceration remained to secure compensation for victims rather than to punish offenders. 3 Imprisonment and capital punishment were viewed as last resorts within African justice systems, to be used only when perpetrators such as repeat offenders and witches posed discreet risks to local communities. [...] As the history of the African prison makes clear, incarceration was brought to the continent from Europe as a means by which to subjugate and punish those who resisted colonial authority. The employment of corporal and capital punishment to stifle political oppression was the central aim of Africa’s first prisons. In light of this genesis then, it is hardly a surprise that present-day African prisons fail to meet their stated goals of rehabilitation and indeed persist in fulfilling the aims and committing the abuses set in motion centuries ago.



and many of whom resort to violence as a result of themselves being exposed to sustained domestic violence (Mc Evoy 2012)—are not forced to face compounded violence and disappearance through incarceration. Perhaps then, “we are able to be compassionate to both survivors and perpetrators of harm,” and in doing so, create a Kenya in which violence and criminalisation of the most marginalised among us is a distant memory.

FATHER

By Ngwatilo Mawiyoo

I love my father; my father loves me.
He teaches me the way I should go.
My father shows me how to survive
and be a good person. He tells me what
I ought to believe. He knows me better
than I know myself. My father knows I want
to go to high school. He says I must
marry. Fathers do the best for their children.
My mother opens the gate and tells me to run,
report him to the police if I must. But

my family when my father finds out, if he is arrested.
Disobedience is bad it will hurt
my family. My father knows me,
my father cares for me. He is the head
of our family, he does what is right for us.

I stay. A man I do not know comes to our home.
An old man. My father tells me I must follow
where the man leads me.

My father loves me,
my father knows me better than I know myself,
my father will show me how to survive.



I walk behind the man.
He leads me to his house. When we arrive it is night.
He tells me to prepare a meal.
My mother has taught me how, so
I do. I clean the dishes.
My mother has taught me how.
The man tells me to prepare the sleeping place.
I am afraid
though no one has taught me how.
I tell myself my father loves me, he knows me
better than I know myself, my father will show me—

The things that happen in the night
no one has prepared me for. Not my mother,
not my father, no one. I tell myself my father loves
me, my father knows better. Fathers do the best—

In my mind, my father's face turns black.
It cannot be seen.





Loud man with an opinion

By Muthoni Maingi

Sometimes we can speak, and when and where we can, we must.


I went on a rant sometime back, and you can check out my words and other women's on it [here](#). *One that I did not expect would turn into anything interesting. It was simply something that I needed to do. I needed to be able to write my anger and put to words my irritation with a normalized phenomenon that masquerades as well meaning or 'honest' advice and opinion that affects women's lives. I believe that language is a powerful tool of violence - we accept that it is as far as racism, ableism and classism/ elitism is concerned - but in many ways we have refused to accept that many women are frustrated, discouraged and broken by conversations at a cocktail, from the pulpits of a church sermon or by words spoken and written by mainstream Kenyan press.*

When we speak we must recognize that the discomfort/anger felt is usually felt by those that wish we were silent. Those that wish to kill us and say that we enjoyed it. And that they may project this anger in silencing tactics, labeling you as the problem.

So I went on a rant, on the free platform that allows me to vent and control my narrative. Were some displeased? Yes. As always, whenever women speak their truth, there will always be a loud man with an opinion on 'how better' it could have been presented for him and those who do not share the 'misfortune' of living in a woman's skin on a daily basis.

The beauty of the internet and the tools it currently avails is that I do not have to seek anyone's permission before I speak, and I do not have to acquiesce to traditional media gatekeepers who operate in a patriarchal state.

I can simply type and let it be, publish and be damned. Many often *repeated and plain* boring silencing techniques were employed to silence mine and



other women's voice on this. I rarely engage with self-identifying mediocrity and lack of thinking, but this once I will provide a list and a response to these concerns:

What about the men?

Well, considering that my conversations were about women's lived experiences, I did not see the point of tackling a 'What about the men?' segment on my free Twitter platform that you also have, and that you can also use to address your 'What about the men?' challenges.

Move on, women have better jobs, cars, more degrees and the boy child is in fact the *one being neglected*.

The boy child is being neglected. Yes! He is, if anything he is being neglected by the same thing I keep complaining about - patriarchal structures. Structures that frustrate single mothers, structures that state and encourage that being a man involves the damaging elements of hyper-masculinity, sexism and misogyny.

A culture that teaches him that to be a man, he should be able to get away with rape because 'she must have *done something*', a culture that instills in him that he is less than a woman who earns more, who is educated - a culture that makes jokes about men being raped, about their being assaulted by women.

Of course I think the boy child is neglected. I am glad that we are on the same page. I look forward to seeing more of your work and online monologues on how this can be addressed. If you so wish, I can send you several feminists' work on this topic. If feminism makes you uncomfortable - because you can't stand women who never get laid, are ugly and that are aggressive and no *one wants or because* feminism is just irrelevant/not well defined - and you're a humanist or gender equalist or a 'meninist' or something, I have stuff that you too can read/watch.

Women have it better? Which women? If we are to dissect this economically and look at peri-urban and rural realities, who are the majority when it comes to having it rough? If we are to look at urban realities, how many women sit on the boards of major Kenyan companies? How many women are frustrated by the challenges of dealing with men who feel entitled



to their bodies while at work, and keep making their lives difficult with unnecessary comments, non-consensual contact and gaslighting? How many women do you think give up on certain jobs because they are simply tired of having to deal with sexist men at work?

You are blaming men/I am tired of men being blamed.

You are tired of men being blamed for what exactly? Where do we see men being blamed? Last I checked it was her fault for being drunk, for smiling at him/them, for wearing XYZ and for walking *alone or walking at night* or working in the office late and many other reasons that do not hold the perpetrator to account.

It was her fault, she must have *done something to make* him mad - most men are usually easy going - if she hadn't *done XYZ he would* not have hit her. Oh, and my personal favourite: men are visual creatures, women need to think about how affected they are by the wardrobe decisions we make.

It was *done to defend our* people, all those rapes and assaults on women and children were necessary to preserve us. She was a whore, she was a dictease, she was always going on and on about how no *one could have her*. She had so much *maringo*... Whatever a man does, his actions are always justified in this society.

Who is blaming men?

Last but not least, the loud man with an opinion.

Let's get one thing clear:

Women do not exist for you.

What she wears is her choice, for her pleasure. Even if her pleasure includes having you as her societal audience ooh-and-ahh over her, or even if her pleasure includes having her partner ooh-and-ahh over her, at the end of the day, what she wears, head to toe is hers to enjoy in whatever way she deems necessary. She does not have to care about your 'being a visual creature' or your desires on what is aesthetically pleasing, and she still deserves every ounce of your respect for being human.

Women do not exist for you. Your analysis on her body, her vagina or her breasts don't mean shit. And you are indeed a horrible human being for



talking about someone *by saying they* have a “basin pussy”. Seriously, what the hell is wrong with you?

Women do not exist for you. No, feminism has not ruined chivalry or any other tired, benevolent sexist meme. Who told you that you deserve a cookie for being nice? Be nice because you want to be nice, not because you expect women to constantly acknowledge that *one time you were* a nice person. If you want to open doors for women, have a blast, open some for men too while you’re at it, being all nice and gender equalist and humanist. If a woman does not want you to open doors for her, don’t. Go open the door for the other *one who likes it* and move on.

When you see a woman video gaming, loving sports and basically being human and enjoying human things, resist the idiotic urge to automatically start quizzing her on the 101s of said thing just so that she can prove to you why she is a worthy fan or enthusiast. Seriously, what is wrong with you? I haven’t seen women quizzing you on the Darling weave range and colours just because you aired your opinion on weaves, something you probably know little on. Do you know why? It’s called respect for other people’s space and value. You could really use some.

Resist the urge to harass someone *for their choices* and deal with your own life, I mean if you’re Kenyan, it is a tough life. Why go adding onto someone *else’s plate when* you can expend your energy on trying to survive this rough Kenyan environment? And you may get better skin for this, who knows? The possibilities might be endless.

(noun)

PATRIARCHY

a system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it.

Butterflies and Metal

Phyllis Muthoni

When he was a baby I carried him on my back
and fed him uji from a plastic cup.

I taught him how to make ugali and fold clothes.
A man must not always rely on his mother.

When he turned thirteen I gave him a first aid kit
because a man should always be prepared.

I take his mother out every week.
She deserves it. And I like her company.

My father said I was henpecked
I told him I wouldn't have it any other way.

Both our mothers tell her she is lucky. Maybe.
I don't know if luck has got to do with it.

I want to be a decent human being.
And home seems like a good place to start.

My granddaughter wants to be a mechanic
like her father. I am filled with fear for her.

How will my butterfly manage?
I am not afraid of the dust and metal.

It is the testosterone and bad habits.
I have seen that they can do to a woman.

But she has the strength of her father
and the grace of her grandmother.

I think she will be all right. I hope she will.
I want her to; no, I know she will be.



In Wolves' Clothing

Notes on Class and Gender Oppression

Nkatha Obungu

Watching the Wolf of Wall Street was a chilling experience; not so much for its raunchy quality (or lack thereof) but because of the exultation of greed as something to aspire for. Jordan Belfort is first portrayed as a young Wall Street stock broker, working at a prestigious stock broker firm (Rothschild) where greed and victimization of clients are the rules of thumb. The glazing of eyes, almost blurry with dollar signs, the promise that anything can be achieved if you are willing to do anything, it is almost a rule book on how to be ruthless and succeed at it. Yet as you watch it, you can't help but feel buffered within Jordan's "climb", "successes" and ultimately, "downfall". It is easy to cheer Jordan as he gets away with misdeed after misdeed even as he revels in a world rife with misogyny, greed and psychopathic behavior that is presented as the model of financial success, and then pity him as he loses his wealth and family to the consequences of his decisions.

It is no wonder that after the film came out, Christina McDowell, the daughter to the real-life Jordan Belfort, whose story and book the film is based on, wrote an open letter to the director Martin Scorsese and actor Leonard DiCaprio, protesting the cultural message that the film sends out to its viewers. While the methods of artistic critique are beyond the scope of this essay, it is true that the film pretends that Jordan's victims do not exist, and portrays them as distant others who are necessary collateral in the struggle to make it from the bottom. The "bottom" is not a place that needs to be humanized, but a marsh that needs to be gotten out of so as to be able to stay afloat by stepping on the heads of others who remain in the marsh. In a particularly emotional scene where Jordan almost quits his firm to avoid criminal investigation, he describes how one of his employees could barely feed her family when she started working for him, and how she had risen to become a millionaire under his tutelage.



Implicitly, in Jordan's world, we learn that it is okay to take from one hungry mouth to feed another; and that injustice is an acceptable means to bettering our circumstances in life.

Let's draw parallels between Jordan's world and the positivity mantra that the self-help legion in Kenya seeks to promote. The proliferation of the prosperity gospel in our churches has us believing that we need, not to help the poor, but to shame the poor into doing anything to stop being poor. It's a classic carrot and stick situation - convince me it's my fault that I am being plagued by hunger, disease, unemployment or famine - and if by some stroke of luck I manage to get out of that situation, I feel no guilt at breaking the backs of other people to maintain whatever class privilege I will have obtained.

In his book, "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed", Paulo Freire outlines the interchange of power between the oppressed and the oppressor. His contention is that too often, the oppressed's idea of liberation is assuming the position of the oppressor and reproducing the oppression that he or she has previously been subjected to.

There's a certain cognitive dissonance that takes place among most people about the acceptability of the means justifying the ends, such that injustice is well and good as long as it leads to the perceived justice of gaining economic wealth. Capitalism is a system that acts like an aberration of aristocracy, in that being rich and powerful is a goal we should aspire to; and those who are so are untouchable. We reward bad behavior and call it *badassery*, being a ninja; taking the focus away from the victims to the villains in a sort of triumphant celebration over the yoke of victory. We live in a theatre of charades where poverty is something to be looked down upon.

A friend once asked: "If justice, freedom and democracy are obviously no-brainers and should be the default, why aren't they as common?" Indeed, why do we preach concepts that we find hard to normalize in our systems? Why is it that we are always "accepting and moving on" as if our true lot in life is to be oppressed? The system has us passively endorsing bad behavior and injustice because there is the implied principle that one day,




we will be the ones to get to the top of the food chain and it will be our turn to oppress others. This is the respective entrenchment of internal dominance and internal oppression within the capitalist system. And so we are willing accomplices to a system that impliedly promises to one day flip the tables and have us feeding from its bosom. Of course, this is a fallacy because the way in which capitalism and patriarchy are structured is such that there's only room at the top for a 1% that feeds off the labour and productivity of the 99%.

In his essay, "Estranged Labour" Karl Marx speaks of the effect of capitalism over the working population. According to Marx, labourers within the capitalist mode of production are slowly alienated from their free and productive nature by being turned into machines for the system. For the most part, labourers have no control over their mode of work and are forced to do rhythmic tasks that require almost-total submission to authority and little exertion of their creative and analytical faculties. This lack of investment into the ultimate value of work leads to the labourer's loss of control over his productivity, as well as over his/her relationships with other people. Labour, which is supposed to be the expression of a person's life, becomes a drudgery within which one is imprisoned, and is to be escaped from at all costs. It is in this scramble to be among the minority that controls production, that work loses its value as a life-activity. Life becomes a means to life.

This is how capitalism oppresses; by restricting our ability to be multifaceted human beings. It limits us to specific components of our labour and ensures that we never quite enjoy the value of our work, turning labour into a means to an end and happiness into a goal that few manage to reach. Patriarchy and capitalism are oppressive systems that are interlinked, both in the way they reproduce internal dominance within those they privilege, and internal oppression among those that the systems oppress.

Intersectionality is a concept in critical theory that describes the interplay between oppressive systems such as sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, ableism, and transphobia, among others; and the fact that one oppressive system cannot be analyzed separately from the other.



Intersectionality operates from the premise that humans are multifaceted individuals who may suffer varied forms of oppression to varying degrees, depending on our position in society.

“There’s no such thing as a single issue struggle”.

- Audre Lorde

Women in Kenya have suffered, and continue to suffer oppression at the hands of both (but not exclusively) classism and sexism. According to a survey carried out in 2013, Kenya ranks 130 out of 148 countries in the UN gender inequality index with unsettling statistics on the gender gap in the informal wage sector, high maternal mortality rates and low percentages of women property ownership. Politically, only 13% of women hold legislative seats.

A significant contributing factor (but, by no means the only factor) is the existence of a legal and institutional framework that affects women and their bodies but is severely lacking in terms of gender parity. We therefore find ourselves in a situation where laws on property, succession, health access, sexuality, leadership as well as affirmative action are legislated upon by the very beneficiaries of a patriarchal system of government. The disgraceful statements made by Members of Parliament as they debated the Marriage Bill are only symptomatic of the widespread sexism that permeates legal and social institutions in the country.

The 2010 Constitution, lauded in various quarters for being one of the most progressive in the world, does a good job in addressing gender imbalances and instituting affirmative action to correct existing gender inequalities in economic opportunities and leadership positions. However, the problem with laws on paper that are left to be implemented by people in positions of class and gender privilege is that inevitably, they will either be watered down or ignored completely.

An advisory opinion submitted to the Supreme Court, seeking guidance on the realization of the 1/3 representation, was the first strike against the constitution’s provisions with the judgment stating, among others, that there was no mandatory obligation resting upon the State to take



particular measures, at a particular time, for the realization of the gender equity principle. This, in a country that prides itself on having a legal framework that actively promotes gender equality and participation. And so, while the principles governing these laws and institutions might be the picture of justice and equality, people who run these institutions will find ways of subverting these principles. Institutional memory, where people are unwilling to change the status quo on the basis that things have always worked in a certain way, is also another factor that heavily contributes to the stilted legal and social order that these laws aim to create.

However, the question also comes in: does mere increased representation of women in leadership translate to concrete benefits for women in general? Does it mean, for instance, that the lot of women in Kenya has improved since the creation of 47 new seats for women representatives after the 2013 election? The principle of internal dominance and oppression still holds when a small number of women are admitted into male-dominated decision making systems that are already patriarchal in nature. Almost inevitably, these systems demand that development and justice take a backseat to political gain and fiscal mismanagement; concepts which, again, adversely affect those who experience economic and gender oppression.

In addition, issues that affect women directly are considered in isolation from discussions on mainstream social and economic policies. An instance that demonstrates this is when the Nairobi County Governor slapped the Nairobi Women Representative in front of cameras, an act that played out gender-based violence on a larger, more powerful, and more threatening scale for the women of Kenya. Without a solid reflection on what this spectacle of people in positions of class and political power represented for numerous other women for whom this sort of violence is reproduced every day, the issue was treated dismissively, even within legislative and judicial circles, where power to order societal change resides. Amid the aggressive calls for justice by civil society groups, there was resounding silence from arms of government, with only half-hearted attempts to censure the governor. Instead, our leaders, whose attitudes, for better or worse, are reproduced in society, ridiculed the ordeal and the attendant effort to get justice for victims of violence against women.



This incident and its backlash (or lack thereof) demonstrated how important issues affecting society are consigned to the pigeonhole of “women’s issues” and accordingly ignored as the preserve of “those evil feminists”. It is not enough to increase women’s quota representation in leadership; we need to also carry out gender mainstreaming by effectively increasing how issues affecting women and other oppressed groups are represented in such fora.

The direction, in which we also need to move, is in supporting grassroots organizations, which work daily to realize gender and economic justice, with more concrete legislative and policy changes. It is a shame that county representatives and MPs can afford to fly themselves out of the country and spend billions of shillings of taxpayers’ money while an issue as basic as maternal health care is consigned to First-Lady do-gooder initiatives.

Aspiring to be rich in a country that is slosh full of economic inequality is not how you save yourself; neither is being a woman leader who uses her position in power to propagate the existing institutional greed in public office.

It is important that every person who believes in justice be part of a larger movement to change the system and not sit at the sidelines, laughing because a woman being slapped is just another “African” norm that needs to be preserved. All forms of oppression are connected; and the sooner we use our respective positions of class, gender or even heteronormative privilege to dismantle injustice, the sooner we can create a just world for ourselves. This is how we win.

Bewitch

Ngwatilo Mawiyoo

Learn how to breathe into it. See the elephant new, see its navel, see it before the poacher sells it dead. Question its size and ask it where its little ones come from. It all depends upon the moment you remember. The poem arrives after you have learned how to be alone in a field where yellow grass grabs at thin red soil for anchor, when you notice a black crow flying over you, how it hopes your fingers would detach. The poem will wait until you are ready to write about the face sketched on the balloon that used to be a glove, how you watched it until your senses dimmed dark enough so they could cut you open and take your appendix. It will wait until you can separate that moment and turn it into someone else's. Until you realize appendices are for show, for fun, to illustrate how well one knows. Poems are the shifting in your middle, psalms, liturgy, confession, deceit, madness: a dark classroom with luminescent chalk erasing the words that cannot heal or slay a witch. You want to become the teacher who wouldn't tell you what 'whet' meant, only that it lived with literal and abstract saliva. Breath is the measure of knowing. With the cords in your throat you wring the neck of an innocent text with a learned cadence that signifies 'poetry,' signifies 'spoken word,' signifies 'shairi,' signifies 'song' and asphyxiates the words to present the perfectly still remains as art or entertainment. That is the inside of a false box. Even in your youth, it bothered you that your sketches were always perfect the first time. Now you know they were never perfect, they were only raw. You just want to bewitch. It is true, you were co-creator, but you did not know it enough to know when the babe was sated, when it needed to shit, when it needed your absence, how you should have defended it. And then you arrive in the snow. For the first time the earth is black and white, the sun does not warm, men will the hour to being. You are not Gabriel the ethereal. You are

sexed, and so are your poems. Everybody believes someone must sleep with you. You choose songs, your own voice reading to you, a man who cannot love you. The poem you try to write again is always better, even if it breaks. Writing it is moving the bookshelf around, the bed the table the rug. It is fixing a lamp at every station at which you will sit. It is trying to make the window seem to face somewhere else, make the room fit better, feel better. It is the only thing a poem can really, actually, do.



(noun)

INTERSECTIONALITY

a concept often used in critical theories to describe the ways in which oppressive institutions (racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia, classism, etc.) are interconnected.



Not your meat



poetry and design: Marziya Mohammedali, photography: Jerry Riley © Koroga III

Marziya Mohammedali

In October 2006, Taj El-Din Hilaly, the Imam (spiritual leader) of the Lakemba Mosque in Sydney, made the following statement in his Ramadan sermon:

"If you take out uncovered meat and place it outside on the street, or in the garden or in the park, or in the backyard without a cover, and the cats come and eat it ... whose fault is it, the cats' or the uncovered meat? The uncovered meat is the problem. If she was in her room, in her home, in her hijab, no problem would have occurred."




At the time, the statement – and sentiment behind it – was widely criticised by the larger Australian community. Many, including Australia’s Sex Discrimination Commissioner, called for Hilaly to not just apologise, but to leave his post as a leader within the Australian-Lebanese community.

The uproar was not limited to the non-Muslim community – Muslims also responded to the comments, with many agreeing that Hilaly had been out of line in his sermon. The then New South Wales Young Australian of the Year nominee, Iktimal Hage-Ali, declared ‘I am no one’s meat’ and proceeded to make her point by appearing as she would normally appear in public – with her hair uncovered, sipping a celebratory glass of champagne in recognition of winning her award.

As a young Muslim woman, I felt sick. Confused. Betrayed. Strong emotions and reactions to a bunch of silly words from people I didn’t know, but these were the people who were supposed to be representative of me, and I did not identify with any of them.

Hilaly’s misogynistic statements were an echo of the conservative clerics I could never accept. The victim-shaming stance, coming from anyone, was deplorable. Coming from a so-called spiritual leader, however, made it even worse. Even though he was not a leader of my community, he stood for the faith I was a part of, and he made me uncomfortable to be a part of that faith. I was conscious of every movement I made, every rustle of cloth as I moved, every strand of hair as it escaped from under my headscarf in case it might become a cause for objection or objectification.

Hage-Ali’s reaction was also difficult to identify with, as much as I agreed with her statements. I agreed with her right to choose what to wear, how to present herself, her strong stance to not let herself be labelled as meat. But she was not representative of me either. I wasn’t quite convinced that the way to be a strong Muslim feminist was to abandon religion altogether, even if I would be the first one to admit that the deeply religious societies I had been exposed to had left many things to be desired in their treatment of women. It wasn’t just that Hage-Ali didn’t wear a headscarf, or that she drank, or that she was later arrested, but not charged, on suspicions of possessing drugs.



It was that she posed the idea that faith and feminism were incompatible: something I struggled with, and sometimes, still do.

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This stance of victim-shaming is something that is deeply ingrained in society, in many different cultures. It is not peculiar to Muslim communities, but exists almost everywhere. It is in the snide comments I hear at university when a student comes in with a short skirt; it is in the self-deprecating way a friend refers to herself as a slut; it is in the tone of disapproval I get when I complain about being hassled by the boys who smoke outside the prayer room on campus.

It is of particular interest to me, however, because an aspect of victim-shaming that I am deeply familiar with is the idea that the way a woman dresses affects how people will interact with her. As a woman who wears a headscarf and relatively modest clothing, I keep being told that there is a certain level of respect accorded to me due to the way I dress. It makes me uncomfortable because what is not being said seems ominously loud: that if I were to change just what I wear, I would not be granted the same respect, therefore I would be the only one to blame if something untoward was to happen.

This is not the reason I wear the headscarf, though. I make a conscious decision to cover myself when I am out in public, and I feel that in doing so, I am asserting my identity as a woman. I am making a choice to cover, just as I made a choice years ago not to. In doing so, I am asserting my right to wear what I wish, a notion that is not unlike that of western feminists who repeatedly point out that a woman who is topless is still not 'asking for it.'

However, I find myself in an uncomfortable position, precisely because of this intersection of faith and feminism – there seem to be more elements that conflict with each other, jarring in their incompatibility, than those that could weave together. I heard of clerics talking of feminism distastefully, arguing that the values espoused by the movement are incompatible with Islam. I have watched as FEMEN takes an almost militant anti-religion



response, with women stripping themselves bare in a way that makes many uncomfortable no matter what their religious background (or lack thereof).

So, is there a middle ground?

I argue that it is possible, that there are many places where faith and feminism might intersect, but that it would be strongly linked to the individual.

There are different interpretations of faith. Hilaly's view isn't mine.

There are different kinds of feminism. FEMEN's kind isn't my kind.

If I were to break down the individual parts of me, it would seem impossible to find a range of experiences within established notions of feminist discourse that would be perfectly matched with my own. How does one navigate the maze of labels and experiences: the woman of colour, ascribing to a minority interpretation of a monotheistic faith system, cis-gendered, middle-class, university-educated, continent-hopping migrant? Those are just a few of the points that come up. In acknowledging these points, and the barriers and privileges that come with them, I also acknowledge how they affect my identity formation. Of course there are areas that address one or more of these points, but I find the personal discourse to be more frayed, patchworked together and often difficult to connect with.

Are there multiple feminisms, then? Are they mutually exclusive, like certain faiths? I would argue that there are different factors that shape a feminist identity, and it is important to acknowledge that race, gender and yes, even faith, would contribute to a more definitive type of feminism.

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The general argument that I speak about is that Islam is inherently feminist, however, the general consensus is that Islamic countries are where some of the worst oppressions of women occur. This is not something that I can, or will argue against. It is true that some of the worst human rights abuses in general happen in countries that declare they are following rulings of Islam.



However, a deeper examination reveals that the religion arose in a time when women were undoubtedly suffering, in an extremely patriarchal society. Female infanticide was common, there was little to no participation of women in the social, economic and political spheres. There was marginalisation of several populations, Arab women being one of the key groups who were oppressed.

This scenario may have contributed to the popularity of Islam amongst the marginalised groups, including women. Away from the religious doctrine, the appeal of Islam to women may be explained in that they found it guaranteed them the rights they so desperately lacked, including the very basic right to live, as Islam explicitly forbade the practice of burying infant daughters. Other rights that were afforded to them included the right to pursue education, inherit, own property, and be active in the public sphere. It also acknowledged that women were sexual beings and although cultural interpretations would have us believe otherwise, there exist rules about the sexual rights a woman has over her husband.

On the other hand, there were – and still are, in Islam today – areas that are of concern, particularly rulings on polygyny, custody of children, and domestic violence against women. It is not possible to discuss the faith's contributions to women's rights without at least a basic acknowledgement of these factors. It is precisely these elements that are seen as indicators of how Islam is incompatible with empowering women and are a favourite of detractors.

However, there are often arguments on interpretation, for example, the infamous 'wife-beating verse' in the Qur'an which states: "... As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them, then refuse to share their beds, then beat them lightly..." (Qur'an, 4:34). Prominent scholars have either focused on the word 'lightly' to mean 'as if with a feather', or have pointed out the word 'beat' may have been mistranslated from the classical Arabic as the word used may also translate to 'leave'. In either case, the discussion is an indication that people are aware of, and are working to address, areas where there are perceived to be difficulties in reconciling faith and women's rights.



In this context, then, it becomes possible to see another kind of feminism emerging, one that draws from a very different background to the existing 'white' feminism today. It is a feminism that takes root in religious values, but is amplified by the existence of those values in large patriarchal spheres of influence, hence it is shaped by cultural struggles as well. Women turn to religion for support of their arguments against cultural traditions, particularly where there is explicit evidence given of what a woman is entitled to that contrasts with the socio-cultural situation she might exist in. This is the philosophy behind movements to empower women, such as the steps being taken in the Kyber-Pakthunkwa region of Pakistan where Malala Yousoufzai was attacked by a Taliban gunman for her outspoken criticism of the extreme religious group's ban on girls in schools. Where the Taliban seeks to control female education, their views are contrasted with the very explicit indication from the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)¹ that 'Seeking knowledge is obligatory on every Muslim.' Not Muslim man – on every Muslim, male or female.

What then, of the notion of covering? Where does that sit in the arguments between faith and feminist discourses?

The argument over mandatory veiling stems from the following verse: "... and not display their beauty except what is apparent, and they should place their head coverings over their bosoms..." (Qur'an, 24:31). This part of the verse is preceded by commandments for both Muslim men and women to lower their gaze, which is in itself an interesting thing to note – the acknowledgment of the gaze as a source of power, and the onus being placed on the person who is looking, not just the person who is being looked at, is often ignored or considered as secondary to the commandment to veil.

1 Muslims often will add Peace Be Upon Him, or a variant thereof, when mentioning the Prophet's name.



Veiling itself is subject to debate. The confusion stems from the question of whether the khimar (head covering) stated in the verse is itself mandatory, or if it is a reflection of what the women were expected to be wearing at the time. The fact that the head covering is explicitly mentioned is often the basis for the common interpretation that the covering of one's head, as well as the neck, ears and bosom, is compulsory. However, if the idea of relative modesty is followed, then the part of the verse stating that women should 'not display their beauty except what is apparent' may indicate that it is fine for a woman to dress in what is common for the time and place she is in, but that she does not need to cover her hair as the khimar is no longer a common item of clothing in many cultures and societies.

The veil itself does not seem to be as problematic as the myriad of systems that seem to exist to enforce it. Saudi Arabia and Iran are two theocracies that mandate veiling as a compulsory act for women living in those countries and are frequently criticised for these, and other laws, pertaining to women. On a more local level, veiling is pushed by religious scholars and leaders in communities, such as Hilaly, with the same verse being cited as incontrovertible proof that it is required. What is common with most of these approaches is that they approach the veil from a male perspective, where the argument is focused on a woman being protected, cloaked in anonymity - someone who is not seen or heard. Add in the usual fire and brimstone rhetoric, and you have many who immediately disassociate themselves from the veil and from the faith because it is incomprehensible that a faith that did award many rights to women who did not have them, would also focus on completely denying the identities of those same women.

Being able to identify everything that was wrong, however, was also what brought me to accepting the idea of covering. A chance talk with a female scholar meant that I was finally able to view the veil through a very basic notion of it actually being a mark of Muslim, female identity. Having the veil interpreted from a woman's standpoint, and presented as a way to emphasise my womanhood and individuality, was what finally made it



attractive. Being presented with the veil as a way to mark who I am, and as a symbol of empowerment, not oppression – all ideas that are embodied in traditional feminist discourse - and not incompatible at all with faith.

While I argue that my decision to cover is truly my decision, I am also cognisant that what constitutes covering is dictated by patriarchal systems. My ability to conform to those systems will influence the perception people have of me, particularly if I happen to be the recipient of unwanted (sexual) attention. At this point, though, I have settled on a way that is representative of both discourses that I identify with.

So where does this leave me?

As a practicing Muslim, I cannot divorce myself from my faith. I believe, sometimes strongly, sometimes with doubt, but I still believe. As a woman, I cannot remove from myself the elements that define my womanhood and how they are influenced by, and interact with, the range of experiences I have.

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Fast forward to December 2013. In a mosque in Nairobi, a woman from India sits, imparting spiritual lessons to the gathering. At one point, she starts to define what constitutes the hijab, the term relating to modesty that is mandated for both Muslim men and women. As with any spiritual leader, she wants to encourage those who are sitting with her, particularly the young women in her audience. To appeal to them, she brings up the example of Hilaly, detailing the incident.

I sit, waiting to hear what she thinks of his words. So far, I have been quite impressed with her points – she seems to be more in touch with the reality of life beyond the mosque’s walls, fusing religious instruction with philosophy, acknowledging the truths of being a woman. It was in this same mosque that I was convinced to adopt the sartorial headscarf, and I am hoping for a revelation.

I am crushed when she proudly says that she supports his viewpoint, trying to impress on the women present the importance of covering up.



I clench my fists, so tight that the nails dig into my palms. My mother, having already heard this story from me several times over, glances over. She knows what I am thinking. She gives me a not-so-subtle look of warning, but I can see the frown lines on her face going deeper, her head moving slightly as she shakes it sceptically.

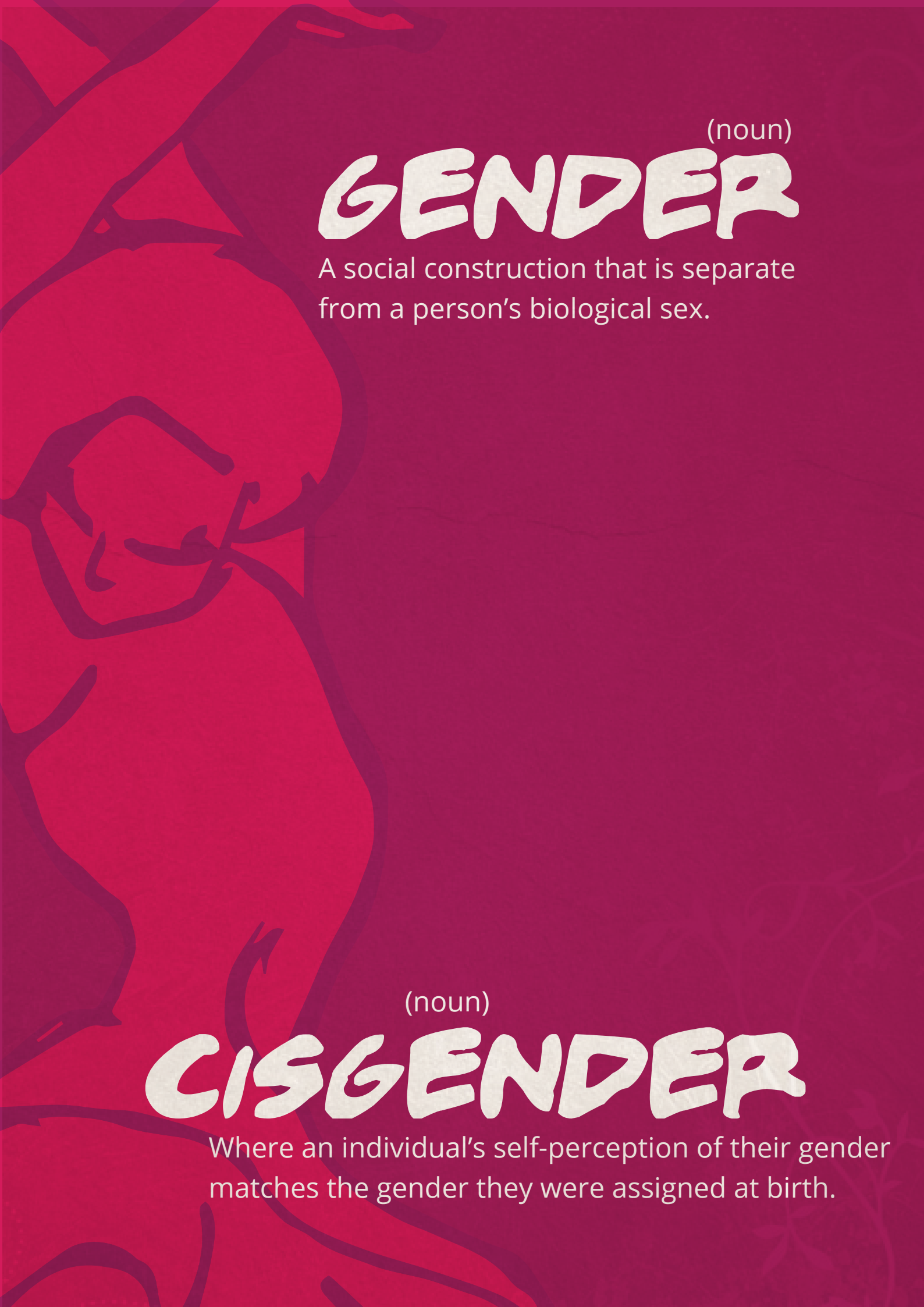
After the lecture, I engage with the woman, trying to converse with her in an attempt to bring attention to the fact that no, a woman's dressing is not, and should not ever be used as a reason when it comes to sexual violence. She is patient, hears me out, tells me that she is proud to know that I still practice in a society that she perceives as hostile to any outward expression of faith.

But I know that my arguments are not being heard. I talk about the sexual politics of Egypt, where women are covering in an attempt to ward off attacks but find it difficult to do so, no matter what they might be wearing. I talk about the impossibly high rate of prostitution in a country like Iran where covering is mandated by law. I talk about how many victims of sexual violence know their attacker, sometimes intimately so.

In everything, she listens, nods, but then rebuffs my argument with the one that if a woman is appropriately covered, she has nothing to fear.

I am left feeling confused, worried, and out-of-sorts. It is something I have come to know intimately, this state of anxiety as I try to weave something stable from the complicated, tangled threads of my beliefs and my convictions about women and their roles, statuses, and rights.

However, I am still afloat, still convinced that despite the confusion, there is space for the conversation between faith and feminist ideals, that I can be both Muslim and feminist.



(noun)

GENDER

A social construction that is separate from a person's biological sex.

(noun)

CISGENDER

Where an individual's self-perception of their gender matches the gender they were assigned at birth.



What does feminism mean to me?

Kennedy Kanyali

When I spoke to a friend of mine about Brainstorm's decision to do an issue on "(Re)defining Kenyan Feminisms", she raised the question (or I raised it, I don't remember) of what exactly about Kenyan feminism needed to be redefined.

Certainly, there is a lot about Kenya's history of women's activism – against colonialism and white supremacist domination, against state repression, against neo-colonialism, against environmental degradation, against harmful cultural practices – that needs to be asserted, restated, yelled from the rooftops. When the Alliance Française recently showcased protest music from Kenya's past and present, all the composers and performers were male. Yet we know, at least from what's available, that performance in women-led protest had the key component of the indignant chant, the mournful dirge, the "in-your-face" excitement of getting one's voice out there. So, women haven't been quiet all this time and their work and world-making has been essential to what we call "good" in Kenyan society today.

And yet, there *is* a need to redefine Kenyan feminism or at least make it known that what feminists say and do today has been made possible by what other women and feminists who came before us have said and done. I am a feminist who also happens to be a queer cisgender male. Surely we must account for how this has come to pass in a society that demands that only two "sexes" exist and in which the roles, aspirations and worldviews of males and females differ markedly (though not naturally).

When I made peace with the inevitability of my queerness, way back when I was eighteen and fresh out of high school, I also made the decision that



feminism and solidarity with women and feminists was how I was going to live out my politics. And when the chance presented itself in 2011 to meet and commune with fellow feminists (who are also based [online](#)), I enthusiastically took this as an opportunity to finally “come out” – to myself and to others – as a proud feminist. Till then, I had never thought that I’d be able to sit in a room full of feminists and just talk. We ended up working through a lot of issues, some of them arising out of our “personal” experiences in our day to day lives while others meeting us on account of activities that we had been conditioned to recognising as only “political”. It was in these meetings that I saw the feminist mantra “the personal is political” being rigorously applied in a way that was meant to change how we carried ourselves and our work, not necessarily making feminist work easier, but more wholesome and rewarding.

Since this transformation and sense of “becoming”, I have applied feminist ideals in my day to day life and in the way I interact with my surroundings. It has also made me aware of how my being a man in society means that I have access to a whole set of privileges kept away from women.

When I walk on the street, I don’t have to face harassment and catcalls from men who firstly view me as an object of their whim, nor am I afraid of walking at night or constantly keeping an eye for a potential rapist. I am listened to when I speak and declared “assertive” when I speak out. I say these things not as a confessional, way after which I have no responsibility for my complicity in the patriarchal system that privileges me at the expense of others.

I’ve spoken to male friends of mine who know patriarchal oppression and their complicity in it when they see it but nonetheless choose not to speak out. Why? Some don’t want the inconvenience of confrontation (as opposed to the high potential for violence or intimidation when women call men out on their sexism and misogyny). Others simply decide that they wouldn’t want someone to call them out when (not “if”) they act in



the same way. People (or at least the younger people I hang out with) will rarely assert on the violence of patriarchal ideology to justify some sexist shit they've engaged in, but will definitely behave as if gender inequality and oppression is a given.

Patriarchy is bad for all of us, especially when primarily used as a means to justify violence, the present state of our political organisations, inequality, culture and even our relationship as humans with other species.

It is most effective when it accords certain privileges to certain members of society, while withholding the rest to a group of men. In Kenya and elsewhere, this is especially true about how the state is fundamentally a patriarchal organisation which discretionarily decides to what extent it will recognise the rights of women, or how adaptable it will be to the needs, goals, demands and existence of women who challenge its most fundamental premise.

Patriarchy is not a “ghost in the machine” in which its effects are free of human interventions. We have all been raised to recognise men as “leaders” and women as “followers”. We have been inculcated to believe that a man has pre-eminent control of a woman; he controls her labour and movement and “owns” all her productive and reproductive achievements. The family is the institution from which the state models itself, empowering it in such a way that it remains the first line of defence in social control. Think about how governments threaten individuals - not through them personally but their families - or how some people fear quitting an oppressive and humiliating job because they can't afford to put their families in economic risk. Patriarchy works because some people are willing to defend it and benefit from it.

Many Kenyans realise how messed up our system is but fail to link our unique set of problems to a common denominator. When we talk about aggrandizement by political elites, massive socioeconomic inequality (8,300



Kenyans own three times as much as what the whole country spends on its budget), extrajudicial killing, militarism, high rates of crime, lack of amenities, a precariat class of urban slum dwellers living one day to the next, the killing of our environment, a new wave of state authoritarianism and so on, many of us refuse to choke it down to a political system that is modelled to precisely lead to these kinds of problems.

A kernel of truth exists in all these issues – wherever violence, inequality and heightened vulnerability is to be found, a patriarchal capitalist elite has caused it. When feminists seek to expand the scope of Kenya's problems to include the longstanding economic, social and cultural oppression of women, we are branded as angry and bitter, and everything we say is ignored on account of its perceived irrationality. If “shrieking feminists” have ever existed, it is on account of screaming the truth that refuses to be acknowledged so many times.

When I think about what feminism means to me, I go back to that boy just fresh out of high school, coming into contact with the hatred and dissonance of this world – the homophobia, the violence, the exposure to a world which you'd always suspected existed but which you hoped never to see. The book reading queer kid, who searched everywhere for something that would smile back at him and found a home in the life-world of feminists who spoke out against the patriarchal roots of homophobia and who strived to create a space as safe as feminism for me.

In a world where political elites are making the decision that queer life should be snuffed out of Africa, I return to that place where I have been welcome so many times, where my contributions have been encouraged and accepted, and have affected me in much the same way as I intended them to affect others. Here I talk, I learn, I debate, I discuss, I create in ways that I have been told were inconceivable. That is what feminism means to me.

The ways we walk

(Blood Knot sequel)

Phyllis Muthoni

I. Mother's motif:

You don't just walk away from a marriage.
You don't walk away.
There are no bad marriages,
only bad people.
If you are a good boy, your woman will stay.
It is coded in the genes: men will stray.

II. Plot A

She left in a casket.
Her three children would keep her company
in the journey to the next world.

He was under pressure. Pressure builds up.
Pressure builds shapes in the head:
hammers, knives, and bats.

She had left for a few months.
He called and begged and cried.
Mother said: see, he is repentant.



III. Plot B

He took a backpack and fled to the mountains.
He left his job and car keys and season tickets.
There were dangerous cracks in his mind.
He needed to seal them before something buckled
under the fear of his demon wife.
In the mountains he found counselling.
He searches the hills for probable answers.
He loses himself in the trees.
For now, there is safety in the distance;
there's safety in not trusting himself around her.

IV. Mother's dilemma

If she stays, they all die.
This is bad.
If she leaves, the marriage will die.
Will she have become a bad person?



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